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Max Weidman
Occidental College

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Wallace Stevens: The Necessary Angel of the (Redeemed) Earth

**Max Weidman
COMPS
3/19/09**

*It was when I said,
 "There is no such thing as the truth,"
 That the grapes seemed fatter.
 The fox ran out of his hole.*

Wallace Stevens begins his poem "On the Road Home" with this enigmatic stanza. The critical discourse surrounding Stevens is often attendant chiefly or solely to the philosophical implications of his poetry. In a recent book, Simon Critchley claims that Stevens raises epistemological questions as straw men, such that epistemology in general is cast aside (4). Another approach might be furnished by concentrating on the earthiness of the poem, which is replete with images, as the ripening grapes, of natural abundance. As the prolific Harold Bloom intones: "for Stevens the prime *materia poetica* is the weather" (186). Similarly, Vendler notes "...the natural cast of his eyes is upward, and the only phenomenon to which he is passionately attached is the weather" (47). Considering Stevens' own, "poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms" (CPP 901), this approach certainly has its appeal. To follow either tendency, however, would be superficial without first selecting a particular facet of the poem upon which to focus. In the above stanza, the epistemological statement and the natural phenomena following it are tied together by the moment of indirect discourse indicated in the first line but only realized in the second. The poem is composed of two kinds of events, speech acts and natural precipitations. In coordinating the temporal and poetic sequence of these events, Stevens presents the indirect discourse throughout the poem as a system—both in what is *said* (i.e. epistemology) and who *says* (i.e. subject-object metaphysics)—which undergoes disruption. What that disruption effects is release: *from* epistemology, *unto* the earth. In his sole book of literary criticism, The Necessary Angel, Stevens lifts a phrase

from one of his own poems to serve as epigraph: “. . . *I am the necessary angel of earth,/ Since, in my sight, you see the earth again*” (CPP 638).

The epistemological concerns bracketed in quotation marks are merely the contents of the discursive system. The quoted portions are more important as examples of communication, between the first- and second-person, than in themselves. The ‘I’ and ‘you’ are the two poles between which the discourse takes place. The actual content of the discourse is disrupted only in principle: what the poem demonstrates chiefly is not a doubt regarding what is said but who does the saying, and what follows from the *instance* of speech, not its meaning. The pronominal forms throughout (with the possible exception of the third-person) step forward in speech as provisional entities: “To say that it [poetry] is a process of the personality of the poet does not mean that it involves the poet as subject” (CPP 670). Neither the ‘I’ nor the ‘you’ featured in this poem correspond in a one-to-one fashion to Stevens. If the first- and second-persons structuring the discourse belong ultimately to the same authorial unity, then their speech is neither subjective nor objective: the discourse is merely an example of projection. In the inevitable collapse of that project(ion), in the inadequacy of its epistemological claims and the untenability of the persons making them, the poem closes upon the possibility of communicating *the* truth of nature while opening upon the possibility of truly touching nature itself.

The poem’s title evokes a suspension both temporal and spatial: the phrases *in transit* and *en route* both come to mind. The title is projective. It points *toward* a provisional ‘home’ but situates the reader in the transition to, not the realization of, that return. Both terms, ‘provisional’ and ‘projective,’ should be understood in the context of

Stevens' poetry and its critics, as ultimately doomed to failure: "There is a project for the sun. The sun/ Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/ In the difficulty of what it is to be" (CPP 330). Stevens contradicts his own injunction, that the sun must bear no name, by this metaphor, "gold flourisher." "The difficulty of what it is to be" refers to the fact that even in cautioning against the ultimately faulty practice of nominalization, names must be furnished, if only so as to be dismantled. What Vendler says of the poem from which this passage is taken, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," holds true for Stevens' work in general: "These are programs for action, not descriptions of action; manifestos, not reports; potentialities, not completions" (24). As Stevens himself famously remarked in a letter describing that poem, "Underlying it is the idea that, in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction. This is the same thing as saying that it might be possible for us to believe in something that we know to be untrue" (Letters 443). The poem's discourse is *projective* in that each instance of the verb 'to say' indicates first a person (subject) *from* whom the saying issues forth and second implies a person (object) *to* whom the saying is directed. The discourse is provisional in the sense of not being exhaustive. The system of discourse (who *says* and what is *said*) succeeds in present-ing the earth only insofar as it collapses into the silence of the final stanza. This technique of Stevens resembles an Ancient Greek convention called *parabasis*, in which the chorus speaks on behalf of the poet. Importantly, as in Aristophanes, this aside is often in the voice of the first-person, though the entire chorus might have recited it simultaneously. Indirect discourse is to the poem as *parabasis* is to the comedy: both give voice to the author's opinion or ideology yet are, ultimately, re-subsumed back into the unity of dramatic (natural) events.

The poem's first three words form the beginning of a phrasal construction that operates through suspension. The "That" completing the phrase does not occur until line three; only then do we know to what that curious "it" refers. This phrase figures a specific time, the 'when,' by first indicating it, then retracing what preceded it, the speech act, and only then describing its contents. The time being described is composed firstly of an instance of communication and secondly of natural phenomena. The reader experiences some difficulty, partly owed to this phrase, in deciding the sequence of those events. The phrase 'it was when...that' relates a consequence, the 'that,' to whatever fills the place of the ellipsis, the antecedent. Even an abstract or obtuse relation, as that between philosophizing and the ripening of fruit, presents the consequence *by way of* (graphically and syntactically) some previous event. The phenomenological experience, that of the reader, is one of sequence. The discourse of line two is followed (in reading time) by the grapes' fattening, which in turn is followed by the fox's exposure. Yet the phrase yoking all three together inscribes them within a moment—they are simultaneous. The two natural phenomena here are temporally instantaneous. They indicate a sudden transition from one visual perception to another: one instant the hole was dark, the next instant that hole became filled with the figure of the fleeing fox. Articulation of the sentence "there is no such thing as the truth" cannot, in either the time-frame of the poem or our reading of it, be simultaneous—that articulation as *sound* has *duration*. Both natural phenomena are without indication of either—they are silent, instantaneous, infinitesimally brief. The first line, which precedes the locution, presents it in the preterit, as having already happened. The third and fourth line refer to the same previous moment of speech but graphically follow it. The natural phenomena exist as grammatically

anterior (“I said” marks the “when” as *before*) but are experienced by the reader as posterior (the demonstrative pronoun ‘that’ is equivalent to the ‘it’), as something reached only *after* having read the words “there is no such thing as the truth.”

The second stanza further complicates this temporal discord:

*You . . . You said,
 “There are many truths,
 But they are not parts of a truth.”
 Then the tree, at night, began to change*

The distinction between speech and phenomenon is initially clearer. The quoted portion has a terminal mark; the “then” following it seems, indeed, to indicate a phenomenon following it. This would be one form of the anaphoric ‘then,’ which “refers not to the same time as that of its antecedent but to a time closely following” (Huddleston, Pullum 1559). ‘Then’ has other uses, however: “it can refer deictically to a time in the very recent past” (ibid). This ambiguity plunges stanza two into the same crisis of decision as the reader experienced in the first: is she to understand the tree’s changing as simultaneous with or as proceeding from the second-person’s speech? Moreover, does either decision imply a causal relationship between the two? These questions form the basis of the present inquiry. As stated, the discursive structure (of which these temporal concerns are but a portion) is formed around the first- and second-persons. Before such questions can be answered, the enigmatic ‘you’ of stanza two must be examined.

The ellipsis between the first and second “You” serves to rhythmically and conceptually separate them. That separation, as with the phrase ‘it was when...that,’ is both graphic and temporal, so that the reader reaches the second “You” only by moving *through* the physical space of the ellipsis and only *after* the hesitation indicated by those three dots. While the *identity* of the speaker might be unified (and this already assumes

too much), the instances of its nominalization are not, as demonstrated by this space-time separation, *identical*. On the contrary, those two instances are separated by a beat. The entity represented by “You” is attributed an action, speaking, only after a demurring in regards to the entity itself. Throughout the poem, Stevens presents the reader with first- and second-person pronouns that seem provisional, tentative, even dubious. In terms of movement, it is the “You said” that dispels that hesitation, as though the shadow of doubt enveloping the provisional ‘you’ were dispelled only by (its) speech.

Thus far the poem has grounded its indirect discourse as an exchange between the ‘I’ and ‘you.’ The first stanza features one instance of the first-person pronoun. The second stanza features two instances of the second-person pronoun. As might be expected, the third stanza features three instances of the third-person pronoun, ‘we.’ This stanza draws the reader’s attention for a number of reasons. The enjambment of the sentence “Then the tree, at night, began to change, // Smoking through green and smoking blue,” carries the reader fluidly from the second to the third stanza. This momentum and the periods terminating each line give it a feeling of closure. Yet the third stanza’s brevity (it is composed of only three lines) spoils this feeling. Though the lines themselves entwine in rhythmic finality, the lack of a fourth amounts to a graphical incompleteness—one which the reader is hard-pressed to ignore:

*Smoking through green and smoking blue.
We were two figures in a wood.
We said we stood alone.*

The repetition of “smoking,” designating a process of transition through consumption, and the aforementioned enjambment place the reader, as the title suggested, in transition. The transition from the first- to second-person occurred formally, as the break between

the first and second stanzas, sans enjambment. Yet the third stanza is not a transition from the ‘you’ to the ‘I’ nor the reverse. Though lexically the third stanza represents a transition from the second- to the third-person, what it effectively produces is a conflation of the ‘I’ and ‘you’—it demonstrates these two entities as themselves inter-transitional. Because of this conflation, the third stanza features the only moment of discourse which is not separated from the rest of the poem by quotation marks. It is as if, in the unification of the poet’s two parabastic voices, the speech is no longer projective, no longer provisional, but enacts what it says.

The third-person pronoun indicates a plurality—since the only other two pronouns in the poem are ‘you’ and ‘I,’ it is safe to assume that plurality consists of a combination of the first- and second-person. Yet the tenth line complicates that conflation by means of a grammatical tension inherent in the construction of ‘we were *two*.’ The first two words have a unified and theoretically identical referent: ‘we,’ ‘you *and* I.’ That referent, as the word ‘pair,’ marks a unit composed of separate parts. By the imputation of two-ness, the third person separates back out into its constitutive difference. The image brought into relief, two people standing against the background of a forest, is already internally wrought with the grammatical bifurcation of ‘we.’ For what surfaces, by way of this grammatical incongruity, is the image of a single person, *brought into relief* by another. This three word phrase performs the contrapuntal operations of conjoining and simultaneously separating the ‘you’ and ‘I’ of the poem.

The grammatical tension is further emphasized by line eleven, whose construction is even more problematic than the previous. The contradiction or tension here centers on the word “alone.” The conventional use of the word indicates solitariness, as of a hermit

living in a wood. Etymologically, however, the word is composed of two seemingly contradictory terms, ‘all’ and ‘one.’ While certain disciplines, as formal logic, might be utilized to defend these terms as not necessarily contradictory, in common speech ‘all’ is used when there is a plurality of elements. ‘One,’ on the other hand, refers to a singularity. The word “alone” indicates a unity but has itself a twofold composition, just as ‘we’ does. Furthermore, the phrase ‘we stood alone’ features the contradiction of the third person nominative, inherently connoting plurality, with a predicate that indicates singularity. The description of either the first- or second-person as ‘alone’ seems logically tenable. Even the phrase at hand might be made so by substituting for “alone” something like “by ourselves,” so that the separation is solely from the rest of humanity. This might be an appropriate reading, were it not impeded by the indirect discourse in this stanza, the only instance throughout the poem of unmarked speech. The contents of the indirect discourse in stanzas one and two do not relate, except by the attribution of speaking, to the first- and second-persons which give them voice. On the contrary, the ‘I’ and ‘you’ are temporary projections of the author, to whom we finally attribute the content. In “We said we stood alone,” however, that which is said does not merely issue *from* the ‘we,’ it is a statement *of* that pronoun, relating its condition. Unlike the first and second, the third stanza contains no natural phenomenon following the indirect discourse—the announcement precipitates nothing. As God’s “I am that I am,” the speech seems tantamount to incarnation, as though the two figures were constituted by it, as though only in *speaking* did the ‘we’ constitute itself. It is as if what precipitates is the truth of the poetic subject—its ‘you’ and ‘I’ apposed internally just as the ‘we’ and the wood against which it stands are apposed externally.

Unlike the first and second, the fourth and fifth stanzas defer the precipitation of natural phenomena:

*It was when I said,
 “Words are not forms of a single word.
 In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
 The world must be measured by eye”;*

*It was when you said,
 “The idols have seen lots of poverty,
 Snakes and gold and lice,
 But not the truth”;*

In each, the quoted speech carries through to the end. The semicolons concluding lines fifteen and nineteen conjoin the stanzas, as distinct items in a list, and situate them in the ‘time’ indicated by the last:

*It was at that time, that the silence was largest
 And longest, the night was roundest,
 The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
 Closest and strongest.*

As in the poem’s first half, this construction begs considerable questions in regards to the order of events it delineates. The semicolons stand out in their curious capacity to coordinate, both syntactically and chronologically, terms in sequence. Since both stanzas form independent and complete thoughts, one might assume the function of these semicolons as non-hierarchical coordination. This possibility is permissible in terms of grammar, but the constraints of temporality bear down heavily upon it. Once again the reader confronts a chronologically prior discourse that she nonetheless experiences only through the present reading. The precipitation of the autumn night in the final stanza is temporally marked by pointing to *two* specific moments at which something was said. Both of those distinct moments of discourse are gathered under a single, singular demonstrative pronoun, “that.” This further entrenches the reader in the difficult decision

of how to understand the ambiguous ‘when’—likely simultaneous with that of the first and second stanzas.

Line twenty further compounds this difficulty: “It was at that time, that the silence was largest.” If this is the time to which stanzas four and five refer, what compels the author to describe it as silent? The only indication of time throughout the poem, each “when,” has been expressly joined to an act of speech. However she understands the connection between this speech and the tumescent silence that graphically follows it, it cannot be as simultaneous. If we posit *saying* as audible and *silence* as the lack of anything audible, then these two moments—that of speaking and that of impinging silence—cannot coexist. Once again the reader is tempted to ignore the grammatical indication, that the entirety of the poem refers to events situated in one simultaneous time, in favor of the phenomenological experience of those events in sequence. Unless she reads out loud, the reader has indeed experienced the poem’s indirect discourse as a kind of silence residing in a phantom ear. Especially with attention rapt upon a poem, a reader *hears* its words in a manner similar to that by which a phantom limb might feel pressure. This Saussure deems the “sound image” of a word. In music the term “audiation” refers to a cognitive capacity to *hear* a note internally, while there is no external source of sound. There is a presence of *sensation* arising out of an absence of any *sensible* data pertaining to the organ in question. This might be one way to reconcile the syntactic equivalence drawn between the instant of discourse and the silence concluding the poem. There is no difference between the reader’s audiation of quoted speech and the audiation of the final stanza’s silence. Notably, the last stanza is the only one that features no pronominal forms. In it, the reader is released from the structure of

discourse that hitherto formed the ground out of which the natural phenomena (just as the fox) sprung. Rather than the stepping forth of the ‘you’ or ‘I,’ which presents knowledge of but ultimately obscures the earth, the reader experiences the earth itself, the unity *out of* which those persons individuated themselves.

The tension between audiation and audition is but one component of the general synesthesia at work in the final stanza. While “synesthesia” medically refers to the production of sensations in one sense organ by stimulation of another, a general theory of poetry as operationally synesthetic is easily constructed. It is the synesthetic aspect of language precisely that compels Saussure to coin the aforementioned phrase, a chimera of two senses, sight and sound. Stevens belongs to a long tradition of American poets who undermine the assumption that poetry’s material existence can be ignored. For ‘this’ [my] poem exists as sound in the reader’s [my] inner ear; the ellipsis of [my] line five spans approximately half an inch of thin, translucent paper. ‘This,’ and any, poem is always already a material object of every sense one could possess.

If the poem as a whole exhibits synesthetic qualities, the last stanza does so not only formally but in its content. Here “the silence” is attributed size, “the night” shape, and “the fragrance of the autumn” temperature. While these attributions seem categorically confused, in the careful words of Stevens the expressions *ring* true. This is possible because such categories depend on a conceptual separation that is never quite sufficient to the phenomenological experience of sensation. It would not seem strange to hear an actor, walking onto stage long after the curtain has fallen and the audience trickled out, describe the silence of the empty house as *large*. Nor would one balk to hear a hiker describe the smell of wintry pine trees as *cold*. The acceptability of such

utterances is owed to a quality of sensation that might be deemed permeability. This permeability, however one might seek to explain it physiologically or chemically, grounds the possibility of synesthesia: were sensation as distinct as the words “eyes,” “ears,” “tongue” etc. synesthesia would never be possible. Because LSD and other hallucinogens have been known to cause it, one popular understanding of synesthesia involves the metaphor of “crossed wires.” What most any careful exercise in reading poetry demonstrates, however, is that sensations are only ever separate in theory; despite the convention of naming them distinctly, many of us experience ‘all’ five senses simultaneously and at all times.

As mentioned, the final stanza contains no pronominal forms. The first-, second- and third-person have all disappeared. The stanza refers to “that time” of the discourse, but neither the speakers nor what was spoken seem to have much bearing on the sensation at hand. The rhyme beginning with “longest” and carrying through the poem’s final word, “strongest,” is conclusive, almost comforting. Perhaps it is this quality that pardons the apparent mistakes of category confusion—perhaps the sonic rightness attenuates the conceptual faultiness. Whatever the case, the final stanza has about it the feeling of release. That word carries a great deal of potentially contradictory connotations. ‘Release’ here denotes, firstly, the *loosening* of constriction—release from bondage or boundary. The poem’s structure hitherto has been that of indirect discourse, forming the poetic space into a conversation between ‘you’ and ‘I.’ The reader, at this point, is released from that structure; those persons have evaporated in the face of the warm, fragrant, autumn night. ‘Release’ also denotes a making accessible (as in publishing a *wide release*) as well as a spreading (as of a smell being *released* into the

air). In being released from the structure of indirect discourse, both poem and reader are released *unto* the fullness of the earth. We are released from the decision crisis of ordering the sequence of spoken and natural events. We are released from the discourse of truth; the silencing of speech *about* the earth releases us into the possibility of *experiencing*, not attempting to make knowledgeable, nature.

What of that discourse—what of truth? There has been no discussion as yet regarding the content of the passages in quotations. All that has mattered is *that* they were attributed to a speaking pronoun. *What* that speaking consists of is, ironically, best analyzed separately:

“There is no such thing as the truth,”

*“There are many truths,
But they are not parts of a truth.”*

*“Words are not forms of a single word.
In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
The world must be measured by eye”;*

*“The idols have seen lots of poverty,
Snakes and gold and lice,
But not the truth”;*

The first two aphorisms, with the play between the definite and indefinite articles, espouse a theory of truth as plural, not unified. Incidentally, the word “wood” in line ten also plays the article game: living in *a wood* is equivalent to living in *the woods*—neither are specific. The kind of truth articulated here does not gain its veracity through concordance with *fact*, indeed: “absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes. This is our intimidating thesis” (CPP 681). The juxtaposition of Stevens’ critical work with these aphorisms is not haphazard: in both one hears Stevens’ academic or philosophical voice. In the poem this voice is distanced from poetry itself by its

inclusion/exclusion within quotation marks; in The Necessary Angel that distance is presumed as the ground of literary criticism. Critchley examines the notion of the willing, or declared, ‘supreme fiction’ as a way to characterize Stevens’ engagement with epistemology. At the inception of Things Merely Are he sets forth twenty-one propositions, *à la* Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” designed to orient and guide the reader. Ranging from the banal to the banally provocative, one in particular riles with its violent appropriation: “Poetry is the imagination touching reality” (11). This maxim is lifted from Stevens’ *Adagia*, a collection of fragmentary thoughts, “To touch with the imagination in respect to reality” (CPP 909). Critchley’s transformation of this fragment into an independent clause, amounting to a closure, does a huge disservice. For Critchley’s version inscribes the touching within a subject-object metaphysics that holds imagination and reality apart. Yet in the *Adagia* and elsewhere Stevens is emphatic in his conviction that the debate between the two (which imbricates that between poets and philosophers) can reach no conclusion—nor should we desire it to (CPP 648).

Epistemology, as expressed in these four statements, fails because it *decides* (Lat. to cut off) between imagination and reality, while Stevens is emphatic that imagination “has the strength of reality or none at all” (CPP 646). While these aphorisms, and The Necessary Angel, are interesting and likely convey a certain tract of Stevens’ thought, they ultimately fail for the same reason that the imperative to give the sun no name fails.

The third aphorism conveys Stevens’ general rejection of a platonic system accounting for language. For Stevens words do not relate *to* (i.e. the “form” of wordiness), they simply relate: “Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions” (CPP 903). The relation between first- and second-person

pronouns demonstrates this. The word “alone,” which resounded in the poem with its internal contradiction, is echoed here. The discursive structure of the poem, which separates the ‘I’ and ‘you’ before conflating them in the ‘we,’ collapses exactly *because* of that separation, which was only ever provisional, temporary. Thus the “form” of a word is not absolute—just as the “idea” a poem conveys is not something separate from the material vehicle of the book. Similarly, the phenomenological experience of reading the poem is not separate from the sensual experience of what it describes. To trope Stevens’ “A poem is a meteor” (CPP 901), if it is effective, if it succeeds in bringing once again to our sight the fullness of the earth, then a poem is meteorological.

The imperative that ‘the world must be measured by eye,’ plays on an internal idiomatic contradiction. When chefs or carpenters measure ‘by eye,’ this means precisely measurement without metric. Measurement is a technology of systematization; it fixes a thing’s identity, quantifies it. This phrase describes the epistemological status of all four aphorisms: each attempts to ground the experience of the earth in a systematic knowledge of it. As Andrew Mitchell, in a paper on Bataille, argues: “Once the known is possessed and internalized, the relation to what lies beyond the self is severed. Our relation to the thing is truncated in possessing knowledge of it” (Mitchell, 2). Here then, to ‘measure by eye’ means to place oneself in relation to the world without attempting to possess it. In poetic time (both that of the poem and the phenomenological experience reading it) the impinging of the earth *follows* the indirect discourse of ‘I’ and ‘you.’ Only in the silence which is precedent, coextensive, and consequent of speech are we afforded *contact* with the earth.

Of the four, the last aphorism is the only one containing any blatant reference which might involve us in the realm of religion—for most monotheists the word ‘idol’ carries with it a great deal of theological baggage. Suffice it so say, for the present endeavor, that the principal valences of this word are ‘something material that represents (positive)’ or ‘seeks to replace (negative)’ God. For Stevens idols, just like poems, are only ever material, of the earth: “the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (CPP 730). Let us not pass over the habitual but strange convention of imputing vision to an inanimate object—as, for instance, an old machine having *seen* its last day. Again Stevens draws attention to a peculiar idiomatic expression by allowing it to work against itself. Here the effect is to emphasize the worldliness of the idol; its poverty is not material, for we ourselves have heaped gold upon it. Likewise, our temples of worship, our crucifixes, have been subject to the same and the same types of plagues as we ourselves. If these idols have not yet seen *the* truth, it is because they always point to a truth *beyond* the earth. Stevens is the necessary angel of the earth—in his poetry the present *earth* is present-ed. The angel does not herald or point towards God; the angel releases us from that tendency by making what is actually present, nature, wholly and sensually accessible.

My project has been tacitly informed by a question coming out of Nietzsche’s The Gay Science, “When may we begin to ‘*naturalize*’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (169). The word ‘redemption’ comes fully loaded with Nietzschean subtexts too great to paraphrase, let alone import entirely. The German word, *Erlösen*, from an Ancient Greek word that also relates to the English word ‘loosen,’ denotes much more than monetary redemption, as of a gift card. It also signifies

what I have called *release*, and is used when describing Christ's *redemption* of humanity. If Stevens is the protagonist, as it were, of The Necessary Angel, the redemption he offers should *not* be understood theologically, as salvation. Rather, it is through the poetry, through the stepping forth and reabsorption of 'I' and 'you,' that we are *delivered from* the epistemological structure of discourse. In the wake of that collapse we are *delivered unto* the earth itself—reabsorbed back into its totality.

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